

Alfred George Purdon

Alfred George Purdon was a sergeant of the 26th Infantry Battalion in the 7th brigade.¹ He served in Gallipoli, Egypt, and later France where he was captured as a POW.² Purdon was born 1st of January 1896, in Brighton, Tasmania to farmers, Alfred Purdon and Alice Mollineaux.³ At the age of 19, he enlisted into the Australian Imperial Force.⁴

He departed from Tasmania on the 24th of May 1915. Purdon arrived in Queensland with the rest of the 26th Infantry Battalion, and left Australia in June. After training in Egypt, the 26th Battalion landed in Gallipoli on the 12th of September 1915.⁵ During their time at Gallipoli, the 26th was on the defence of crucial spots. They were stationed at places such as Russell's Top, Courtney's Post and Steele's Post, all along the Monash Valley above Anzac Cove.⁶ These places were heavily contested throughout the Gallipoli campaign, as Monash Valley was at the heart of the ANZAC position.⁷ However, on the 21st of October, Purdon was wounded from a bullet to the leg. According to his service record, he was taken all the way to a hospital in London. Two months later, after recovering in hospital, he arrived back in Egypt.⁸

While in Egypt, he did garrison duty, or guarding, on the Suez Canal.⁹ This canal was vital for the Allies, as it was a direct transport route from Europe to northern Africa, allowing supplies and men to be transported much quicker.¹⁰ Purdon stayed there for about a month, before re-joining his battalion, at the Egyptian city of Ismailia, on the 11th of January 1916.¹¹



Alfred's parents, Alfred Purdon and Alice Mollineaux on their wedding day, September 2nd, 1884. Libraries Tasmania

¹ Purdon, *Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 1) National Archives of Australia. <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=8022754>

² Purdon, *Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 16) National Archives of Australia.

³ Purdon's Birth Certificate. Purdon, Alfred George. (n.d.). Libraries Tasmania <https://stors.tas.gov.au/NI/1061527>

⁴ Purdon, *Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 1) National Archives of Australia.

⁵ 26th Australian Infantry Battalion. Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51466>

⁶ 26th Australian Infantry Battalion. Australian War Memorial. (n.d.).

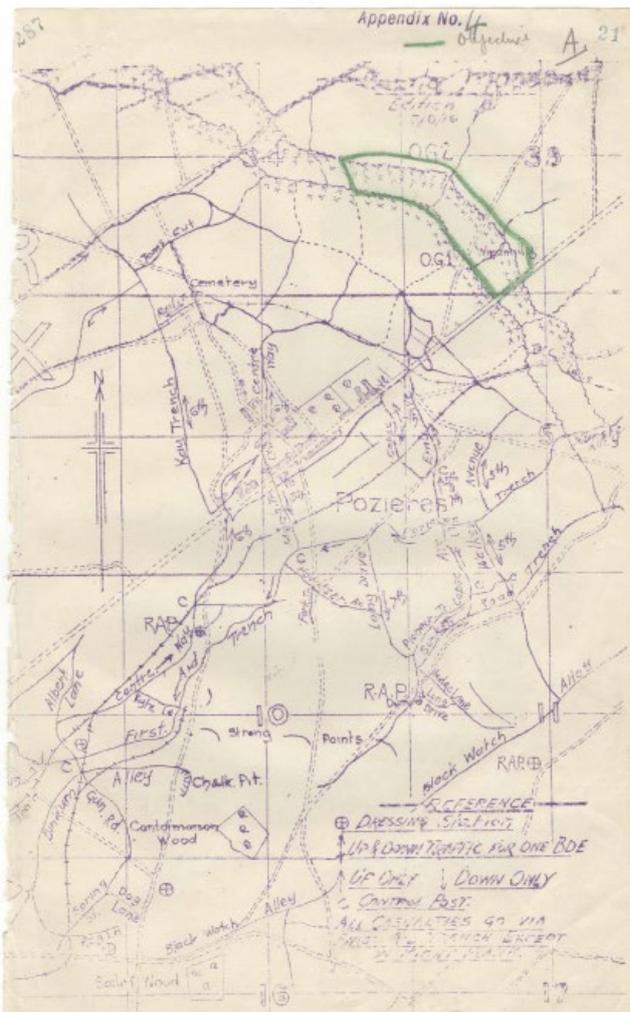
⁷ Courtney's Post. (n.d.). www.awm.gov.au; AWM. Australian War Memorial, from <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/PL66>

⁸ Purdon, *Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 21) National Archives of Australia.

⁹ Australian Prisoners in Germany. (1919, April 30). *Mercury*. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/12393563>

¹⁰ National Army Museum. (n.d.). *Egypt and Palestine campaign | National Army Museum*. www.nam.ac.uk. <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/egypt-and-palestine-campaign>

¹¹ Purdon, *Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 21) National Archives of Australia.



The map the 7th brigade used to carry out their attack on the German trenches. Purdon would have attacked OG1 (the section highlighted in green), starting from Bapaume Rd (the road that is directly right of OG1). 7th Brigade War Diary, August 1916.

In March of 1916, Purdon embarked from Alexandria to Marseilles, a city in France.¹² While in France, Purdon and the rest of the 26th battalion would experience some of the worst battles that occurred near the Western Front.

The 26th went to places around Armentieres, near the border of Belgium and France.¹³ During this time, Purdon would be wounded again from a bullet to the cheek. He was transferred to an Australian hospital in France, and later re-joined his battalion on the 2nd of July.¹⁴

Purdon, and the rest of the 26th, then went to places all over the Somme. Their goal was to support the Allied objective of weakening the German army. This was planned to be done by drawing the German reserves north of France. The battles on the Somme were some of the deadliest in human history, with roughly a million casualties in total.¹⁵

For Purdon, this all came to a climax on the 28th of July 1916. On this day, the 7th brigade carried out an attack on German trenches located in Pozières. The 26th battalion started at Bapaume Rd, and headed North towards the windmill that was behind the German line.¹⁶ Lasting all

through the night, this attack was a failure. Especially for the 26th, who is said to have had unclear instructions. While isolated groups of the battalion did break the German lines they were told to retreat due to the overwhelming German forces.¹⁷ Despite this, Purdon was left behind; he had been captured by the Germans.

He was originally believed to be missing in action. However, a postcard dated the 14th of August 1916, addressed to his parents, read, "Just a line to let you know I am quite well, and a prisoner of war. It was hard luck being taken prisoner, but I did my best. I think I am what

¹² Purdon, Alfred George Service Records. (n.d.). (Pg. 8) National Archives of Australia.

¹³ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

¹⁴ Purdon, Alfred George Service Records. (n.d.). (Pg. 22) National Archives of Australia.

¹⁵ Schofield, H. (2016, June 29). The Somme: The battle that France forgot. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36585199>

¹⁶ 7th Infantry Brigade War Diaries. (1916, July) (Pg. 29). AWM; Australian War Memorial. <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1009472/bundled/RCDIG1009472.pdf>

¹⁷ 7th Infantry Brigade War Diaries, 1916 (Pg.23)

you would call a football of fate.”¹⁸ After receiving this letter, Purdon’s parents notified authorities about what had happened.¹⁹ Purdon was now officially a prisoner of war.²⁰

According to Purdon, he was first taken to barracks at Cambrai, a city in France forty kilometres away from Pozieres.²¹ Upon reaching the barracks, Purdon and the other Australians noticed the words “Gott strafe England,” written largely on the walls.²² This translates to “God punish England.” For Purdon, this was the beginning of a life in a hell. The prisoners at these barracks were treated awfully. They had barely enough food to survive.²³

They were then sent to Westphalia, a region in north-west Germany. For eight weeks they were again starved.²⁴ It was only when they had reached Minden, a town in the north of Germany, did Red Cross packages begin to arrive for them.²⁵

A German record about Purdon once he was captured. Alfred George Purdon’s service records, (Pg. 23).

Conditions got worse for Purdon once he arrived in Heestenmoor, a small camp near the town of Wesendorf.²⁶ It was the dead of the German winter, at a place with snowfall and temperatures that frequently dropped below 0 degrees Celsius. The clothing was terrible, and did not stop the harsh cold, and fires were not allowed.²⁷ Red Cross packages were stopped randomly, and Purdon described the food given as a “plight” situation.²⁸ He also says many men went to hospital. He assumes most of them died.²⁹

Purdon spent six months in a camp at Diepholz, a town in northern Germany. There, he was put to work planting vegetables and moving heavy equipment.³⁰ Purdon believed the food was inedible, that if the handful of Red Cross parcels didn’t get through, Purdon and the rest of the Australians would have perished.³¹

By September 1917, according to his service records, Purdon was interned at Soltau.³² According to Purdon’s account, he was taken to Soltau in July 1918.³³ Due to differing accounts, what actually happened is unclear. What is clear is the fact that Purdon’s arrival into Soltau was in the latter half of the war. By 1918, Purdon said that the Germans, the

¹⁸ *Tasmanian Casualties Some Personal Notes*. (1916, October 18). Trove; Mercury. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1035181>

¹⁹ *Purdon, Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 33) National Archives of Australia.

²⁰ *Purdon, Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 29) National Archives of Australia.

²¹ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²² *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²³ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²⁴ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²⁵ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²⁶ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919; Archivalie des Monats, 2018 December POW Camp Ehmen*. (2018, December). www.wolfsburg.de. <https://www.wolfsburg.de/kultur/geschichte/izs-neu/izs-aktuelles/archivalie-des-monats-2>

²⁷ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²⁸ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

²⁹ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

³⁰ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

³¹ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

³² *Purdon, Alfred George Service Records*. (n.d.). (Pg. 16) National Archives of Australia.

³³ *Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919*

sergeants especially, were becoming more and more brutal.³⁴ The prisoners were forced to sleep on cold floors and the unsanitary state led many men to die in hospital. Like the other camps, Purdon believed that if no Red Cross parcels were received, the Australians would have all died. He said that the other POWs there, such as the Russians, “died off like flies,” detailing how he saw a group of, once, six hundred Russian men, reduced to thirty.³⁵ Prisoners of the camp were also sent to coal mines and worked in fields for fourteen to sixteen hours a day.³⁶ They were constantly under the fist of the German guards, who did not care for them. In a later interview for *The Mercury*, Purdon describes a French prisoner, forced to stand for six hours in the cold until he collapsed in a dead faint. A German guard then started beating his body with a rifle. The guard used so much force that the rifle broke. The French prisoner’s body was then kicked by the German guard, who was yelling at him to get back up.³⁷ Purdon endured these conditions for a few months, before he was transferred to Aachen, a German city, and then finally, to Holland in August of 1918; a neutral country.³⁸ He later arrived in England on the 22nd of November 1918.³⁹

Upon arriving home in 1919, Purdon lived a good life. In early 1921, he married Annie Jane Smith, who he went on to have children with.⁴⁰ The first, Ray Purdon, in 1922.⁴¹ Terence Purdon in 1923.⁴² And Nancy Purdon in 1925, who sadly passed away at only three weeks old.⁴³ Purdon and Smith would go on to have four more children.⁴⁴

For most of his life, Purdon and his family lived in Bellerive, where Purdon worked as a sawmiller.⁴⁵ He passed away in 1981, at the age of 85.⁴⁶ During his time as a prisoner of war, Purdon experienced hunger and bleak winters. He witnessed the worst of German prisoner camps. He saw the brutality before his eyes. He saw men he would have considered friends die. Purdon saw the unimaginable. Yet, he came home. He raised a family and tried his best to live a great life.

³⁴ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

³⁵ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

³⁶ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

³⁷ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

³⁸ Australian Prisoners in Germany, 1919

³⁹ Purdon, Alfred George Service Records. (n.d.). (Pg. 22) National Archives of Australia.

⁴⁰ Alfred Purdon and Annie Jane Smith Marriage Certificate. (1921). Libraries Tas <https://stors.tas.gov.au/NI/1960833>

⁴¹ Purdon, Ray William’s Service Records (Pg. 1). (1939). National Archives of Australia.

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=4508221>

⁴² Purdon, Terence George’s Service Records (Pg. 1). (1939). National Archives of Australia.

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⁴³ Family Notices. (1925, October 8). *Mercury*. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/29115547>

⁴⁴ Engagement. (1952, February 5). *Mercury*. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/27069626>; Family Notices. (1952, April 12). *Mercury*.

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Archives of Australia. <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=6499140>;

⁴⁵ Alfred George Purdon’s Will. (Pg.1) (1981). Librarianstas.ent.sirsidyntix.net.au. <https://stors.tas.gov.au/AD960-1-60-21323>

⁴⁶ Alfred George Purdon’s Will, (Pg. 2) (1981)

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